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ABSTRACT

The Birmingham (Alabama) school district regressed from a model system in 1926 to a poorly equipped, underfunded one in 1975. In that year, however, in spite of recession and joblessness, the citizens voted a $3 million tax increase for schools. The success of the election may be traced to several factors. Citizens were concerned about the declining quality of education, city leadership was socially and economically progressive, and the school improvement objective was easily understood and acceptable to the citizens. While the support of community leaders was being sought, the elementary schools were doing a self-study preliminary to accreditation. Following a community survey on the tax election, a campaign strategy was developed which featured arranging for a single-issue election, identifying supporters and getting out the supporting vote, and having ready a last minute media campaign in case it was needed. Educational gains are already being seen in Birmingham since the tax election was passed. (LS)

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School Tax Increase During Hard Times

--The Birmingham Story

by

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School Tax Increase During Hard Times

--The Birmingham Story

Fifty years ago, in 1926, the Birmingham City Schools was at its zenith of quality education. Its supervisors were authors of textbooks used all over the country. At a time when travel was much harder than it is today, educators came from all over America to see the model schools in Birmingham. The voters of the city had just approved an increase in local property taxes for schools, making the system one of the best financed in the Southeast. Local support was over one-half of operating expenses.

For the next 50 years, Birmingham operated on the same local tax rate established in 1926. Compared to what other systems were doing around the nation, the schools gradually, a year at a time, slipped behind. Except in the High Schools, library support from tax money dried up. Elementary librarians were deleted. Where books existed, they were being bought only with PTA project money. Some schools averaged only one or two books per pupil in room collections. Instruction requiring specialized teachers for the middle grades: Home economics, industrial arts, music, art, physical education also dried up in all but the largest elementary schools.

In 1975, Birmingham, like the rest of the country, was in a business recession. Inflation was double digit. Unemployment was high. Enrollment levels had declined from 75,000 to 54,000 in ten years. Reading scores were lower than ever. School Board issues were being defeated all over the country. Local tax increases were almost nonexistent.

In this setting, the citizen of Birmingham voted to increase their taxes for the schools by five mills or $5 thousand of assessed valuation bringing over $3 million of new annual revenue to the system. That revenue has been used to lower pupil-teacher ratio in the elementary schools from 28:1. Guidance Counselors were employed. Librarians were employed for all 78 elementary schools and additional library aides for the larger ones. Over a million dollars in library books were purchased.

How that was done is the topic of my comments today. A short passage from Stuart Little, the delightful books about the anthropomorphic mouse written by E. B. White serves as a valid setting:

Just as the sun was coming up, Stuart saw a man seated in thought by the side of the road. Stuart steered his car alongside, stopped, and put his head out.

"You're worried about something, aren't you?" asked Stuart.

"Yes I am," said the man, who was tall and mild.

"Can I help you in any way?" asked Stuart in a friendly voice.

The man shook his head. "It's an impossible situation, I guess," he replied. "You see, I'm the Superintendent of Schools in this town."

"That's not an impossible situation," said Stuart.

"It's bad, but it's not impossible."

Another anecdote is suited to the situation. A popular Charley Brown cartoon has Charley standing on a pitcher's mound saying "How can we lose when we're so sincere."

Sincerity and the belief that something is possible are necessary conditions for any change in education, but are far from sufficient, especially when a citizen's election is involved. The age of public deference to requests are long gone. The public is increasingly demanding to know what is being done in schools and how their money is being spent; on the other hand, the belief

that education, the "right" kind of education, can provide the road to a better life is as strong as ever. There are many controversies over what the "right" kind of education consists of, but the average citizen still maintains a strong loyalty to the value of schools.

Looking back over the successful tax referendum in Birmingham, there were a number of decisions made and activities carried out that were important. These observations are not offered as a magic formula for getting more financial support for schools. In other towns, other times, other things may work or nothing may work.

In Birmingham, however, in 1975, certain factors were critical.

1. Concern about the apparent declining quality of the schools was widespread among the citizens. It was coupled with a high value placed on public education. A large percentage of Birmingham citizens are in the lower income brackets. Typically, such people want more for their children than they have for themselves and see education as the way to a better life. That same belief was maintained by parents of other income levels.

2. The elected and informal leadership of the city was and is socially and economically progressive. Following the ill-fated church bombing in the late 1960's, the voters changed the form of government and elected people who paid attention to concerns of all the citizens. Change was so dramatic that several years ago, Birmingham was selected by the League of Municipalities as an All-American City. Seeing better schools as a necessary condition for a better city, the cities leadership was ready to turn its efforts to better schools.

3. A school improvement objective was selected that was simple, easily understood by citizens and possessed high public acceptability. The objective

was to accredit the elementary schools by reducing parent-teacher ratio, employing guidance counselors, and re-establishing libraries in each school with librarians, aides and books. The objective was almost invulnerable. Who can be against the elimination of over-crowded classes and the establishing of libraries in a school system where learning to read has declined? Many people were and are opposed to a tax increase for any purpose.

4. Widespread support from community leaders for the improvements needed was sought over a 12 month period. Political, business, labor, PTA, newspaper leaders, both individually and through their organizations were contacted to get support for the goal of elementary school accreditation. The emphasis was placed on problems in the schools and how accreditation would help. The fact that money would be required was not ignored, but neither was it emphasized during that 12 month period.

5. All 78 elementary schools began working on the self-study required for accreditation, involving the parent leaders in the schools <u>before</u> a decision was made to call an election for a tax increase. This was risky because the self-study is hard work and the disappointment would have been disastrous if we were not able to get $3 million in new money. But the self-study process builds commitment of its participants. By December of 1974, there were several thousand teachers and parents involved in accreditation self-study throughout the city.

6. A check with reality was made in December, 1975. A professional firm was hired to survey voters to determine if a successful tax referendum was possible and if so, what kind of campaign was most likely to succeed.

The results of the survey showed that half the voters would be for and half against a tax increase for accreditation. However, 75% believed a referendum would not be successful.

7. Based on the survey and the advice of several successful elected officials, a campaign with the following features was developed and implemented.

(a) A single-issue election was scheduled to avoid conflicts with other issues.

(b) Heavy reliance was placed on identifying supporters and getting them to the polls.

-Assuming parents were supportive, much information was sent to them.

- A voters list was secured. The PTA Council organized over 2,000 canvassers across the city, each with 25 names to call. Almost all of the 50,000 voters in Birmingham were called one or two weeks before the election to see if they were pro or con. Their opinion was noted and on election day, those who were for the tax were again called urging them to go to the polls.

-Transportation to the polls was arranged across the city with private automobiles. Some churches provided their church buses to go through neighborhoods and carrying voters to the polls.

(c) The use of mass media was minimized. There were a few editorials supporting the issue and an occasional speech report, and occasional radio and TV interviews, but a large scale media campaign was avoided because it would be costly and because in a close election, it could serve to stir up opposition. A media campaign for last minute use was prepared in case some outspoken organized opposition emerged with a media campaign. Fortunately, that never materialized.

At the end of election day, the outcome of the referendum was close but decisive. For the first time in 50 years, the voters of Birmingham had approved a tax increase for the schools.

At the beginning of the past school year, we had employed additional teachers to lower the parent-teacher ratio, guidance counselors and librarians. The new librarians were deep into the process of ordering books and equipment.

At the end of the past school year, all the necessary books were ordered and most had been received. Every school had completed its self-study and been evaluated by a visiting committee.

Next fall, at the Annual meeting of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, we expect that all 78 elementary schools will be accredited.

Those events made Birmingham an exciting place. They can be described in terms of campaign strategy or accreditation certificates. What is happening to the children in the schools, however, is what makes the whole effort significant and worthwhile. Caring for the children, their present and their future, is what made the leadership of Birmingham support the effort. Caring for the children is what led over 2,000 citizen volunteers to work so hard.